1	IN THE SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES
2	x
3	JASON M. RANSOM, :
4	Petitioner :
5	v. : No. 09-907
6	FIA CARD SERVICES, N.A., FKA MBNA:
7	AMERICA BANK, N.A. :
8	x
9	Washington, D.C.
LO	Monday, October 4, 2010
L1	
L2	The above-entitled matter came on for oral
L3	argument before the Supreme Court of the United States
L4	at 10:06 a.m.
L5	APPEARANCES:
L6	CHRISTOPHER P. BURKE, ESQ., Las Vegas, Nevada; on behalf
L7	of Petitioner.
L8	DEANNE E. MAYNARD, ESQ., Washington, D.C.; on behalf
L9	of Respondent.
20	NICOLE A. SAHARSKY, ESQ., Assistant to the Solicitor
21	General, Department of Justice, Washington, D.C.; on
22	behalf of the United States, as amicus curiae,
23	supporting Respondent.
24	
25	

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1	PROCEEDINGS
2	(10:06 a.m.)
3	CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: We'll hear argument
4	first this term in Case 09-907, Ransom v. FIA Card
5	Services.
6	Mr. Burke.
7	ORAL ARGUMENT OF CHRISTOPHER P. BURKE
8	ON BEHALF OF THE PETITIONER
9	MR. BURKE: Thank you, Mr. Chief Justice,
10	and may it please the Court:
11	In 2005, Congress passed the Bankruptcy Act.
12	It made a policy decision to limit judicial discretion
13	on a case-by-case basis in the area of reasonable and
14	necessary expenses. It did so by creating a formula
15	that entailed an aggregate set amount of expenses for an
16	individual.
17	Now, Congress could have created this from
18	scratch. It could have used an arbitrary figure. But
19	instead, there were figures that the IRS already had,
20	based on Census Bureau statistics, that said nationwide,
21	in a certain area, an individual would spend this much a
22	month on average.
23	In the case of Mr. Ransom, that's
24	approximately 2500 a month. Forgetting about how it's
25	divided up, if I had 100 people come in and answer the

- 1 following five questions the same way Mr. Ransom did,
- 2 and that's age, location, household size, gross income,
- 3 and if you have a vehicle, how many, they would all get
- 4 a \$2500 standard aggregate deduction, which works out to
- 5 \$150,000 over a 5-year period.
- 6 Now, the crux of this is whether or not
- 7 courts are allowed to dig in and cut out pieces of the
- 8 standard aggregate amount.
- 9 JUSTICE ALITO: Why is that the crux of it?
- 10 Congress made reference to the local standards, right?
- MR. BURKE: Yes.
- 12 JUSTICE ALITO: And were the -- was the
- 13 commentary in the Collection Financial Standards in
- 14 existence at the time when Congress enacted this
- 15 provision?
- 16 MR. BURKE: There was a Collection Financial
- 17 Analysis that was in place, and it was noted in 1998 as
- 18 a prior version of the bill that ultimately wasn't
- 19 passed.
- 20 JUSTICE ALITO: And that explains what the
- 21 IRS understands the local standards to mean; isn't that
- 22 right?
- 23 MR. BURKE: I would disagree with that. I
- 24 would say -- well, it would -- it would explain what the
- 25 IRS means, but that's where I would end it, because the

- 1 IRS standards are used to collect taxes. They are
- 2 discretionary. They --
- JUSTICE ALITO: Well, I understand that, but
- 4 Congress decided to make reference to the local
- 5 standards in this bankruptcy provision, didn't it?
- 6 MR. BURKE: Standards.
- 7 JUSTICE ALITO: Yes.
- 8 MR. BURKE: It didn't go beyond that.
- 9 JUSTICE ALITO: And this -- and at the time
- 10 when it did that, there was official IRS commentary
- 11 regarding the meaning of those standards, correct?
- MR. BURKE: For the IRS to use in collecting
- 13 taxes.
- 14 JUSTICE ALITO: And your argument is that
- 15 Congress intended to adopt the standards promulgated by
- 16 the IRS, but not the IRS's interpretation of the
- 17 standards.
- MR. BURKE: Correct, not their methodology
- 19 or interpretation.
- 20 JUSTICE GINSBURG: Doesn't the chart say
- "ownership costs"?
- MR. BURKE: Yes.
- 23 JUSTICE GINSBURG: And you would read that
- 24 to mean non-costs as well? I mean, if the -- if the
- 25 table is called ownership costs, then why not use the

- 1 IRS's definition of what costs are, and that definition
- 2 says, what, loan payments and lease payments?
- MR. BURKE: Because you -- we have to look
- 4 at it as a standard aggregate. And what I mean by that
- 5 is -- okay, the Bankruptcy Code doesn't define ownership
- 6 costs. And ownership costs could be the replacement
- 7 value. It could be buying a new vehicle. It could be
- 8 the costs associated with making payments on a vehicle.
- 9 What that -- that average number is, in this
- 10 case, \$471, is a nationwide figure that somebody would
- 11 spend on average in a month. It doesn't mean that any
- 12 one individual spends that amount.
- 13 JUSTICE SCALIA: Mr. Burke, isn't it --
- 14 isn't it the case that, even on the other side's
- interpretation of it, it doesn't come down to actual
- 16 costs anyway? Isn't it the case, or do I misunderstand
- 17 it, that so long as there is one payment, you get the
- 18 entire deduction?
- 19 MR. BURKE: That's their position, or even
- 20 \$1.
- JUSTICE SCALIA: Even one payment of \$1, you
- 22 get the entire deduction. So to argue this case as
- 23 though it's a question of whether you actually expend
- 24 the money that you're getting the credit for is
- 25 simply -- is simply false. You don't do that under

- 1 either side's interpretation, right?
- 2 MR. BURKE: Again, I would perhaps --
- JUSTICE SCALIA: I'm trying to help you,
- 4 Mr. Burke.
- 5 (Laughter.)
- JUSTICE GINSBURG: Mr. Burke, before you
- 7 respond to that question, isn't it so that in the event
- 8 that Justice Scalia just proposed, the trustee could
- 9 propose an amendment to the plan to reflect that that
- 10 cost is no longer being incurred?
- 11 MR. BURKE: The cost has never been
- 12 incurred. That's the point. And --
- 13 JUSTICE GINSBURG: My question is: In the
- 14 situation that Justice Scalia proposed, it's not
- 15 automatic that the \$471 gets deducted because there
- 16 could be proposed an amendment of the claim to reflect
- 17 that that -- there's no longer any expense for
- 18 ownership.
- 19 MR. BURKE: In the situation where there is
- 20 a dollar, of course, an amendment can be made. But
- 21 the -- the dollar doesn't show up in the means test.
- 22 The means test is the aggregate --
- 23 JUSTICE GINSBURG: But it isn't -- it isn't
- 24 automatic that because there's one payment, then
- 25 forever, the rest of the 5 years, he gets to deduct the

- 1 \$471.
- 2 MR. BURKE: That's what the lower court
- 3 said.
- 4 JUSTICE SCALIA: Excuse me. What -- what
- 5 happens under the tax law? Do they make an adjustment
- 6 under the tax law as well?
- 7 MR. BURKE: Under the tax law, you get a
- 8 standard deduction.
- 9 JUSTICE SCALIA: A standard --
- 10 MR. BURKE: No different than here. Nobody
- 11 goes behind the scenes and says, hey, what is that
- 12 standard deduction?
- 13 JUSTICE SCALIA: Right. So that they --
- 14 what is suggested is that you look at it and apply the
- 15 IRS's approach as to whether you get into the chart, but
- 16 then you don't use the IRS's approach when the trustee
- 17 takes you out of the chart. Is that what you think is
- 18 the law?
- 19 MR. BURKE: No, that's not what I think is
- 20 the law. What I'm saying is Congress has given, in this
- 21 case, an individual like Jason Ransom \$150,000 over 5
- 22 years to spend. They are not saying whether he actually
- 23 spends it in any one category.
- For instance, the car ownership might be --
- 25 equate to \$28,000 over 5 years. Rent might be 1,000.

- 1 That's 60,000 over 5 years. Congress did not say go
- 2 back and make sure Mr. Ransom is spending every dollar.
- 3 These are averages across the nation. And when it comes
- 4 to a car ownership expense, we're not saying spend \$471.
- 5 Oh, you have no payment? You didn't spend anything for
- 6 5 years?
- 7 No. What it's saying is, over 5 years, I
- 8 have a cost associated with owning that vehicle, whether
- 9 it's a loan or lease payment, whether it's replacing the
- 10 vehicle, whether it's major repairs, on average, across
- 11 the country.
- 12 JUSTICE BREYER: You do. You do, but the
- 13 difficulty that I -- I don't get the answer to
- 14 Justice Ginsburg's first question.
- 15 Of course you have all kinds of costs
- 16 dealing with ownership, but what the IRS says, what it
- 17 says in the statute, is you are supposed to take the
- 18 applicable costs from IRS. And what it has on page 5a
- is it has something called "ownership costs."
- MR. BURKE: Correct.
- JUSTICE BREYER: And it defines those as
- 22 \$471.
- MR. BURKE: Correct.
- JUSTICE BREYER: And then on 3a, where it
- 25 says what ownership costs are, it says the

- 1 transportation standards consist of nationwide figures
- 2 for monthly loan or lease payments, referred to as
- 3 ownership costs. So when I read that, I said ownership
- 4 costs means monthly loan or lease payments, nothing
- 5 else.
- 6 Now, you have all kinds of other things.
- 7 It's just these words "ownership costs" don't refer to
- 8 those other things, because of that definition given
- 9 right there. That's what I thought Justice Ginsburg was
- 10 initially asking.
- 11 JUSTICE GINSBURG: Yes, I was.
- 12 JUSTICE BREYER: And I -- and how -- how do
- 13 you get out of that what I think of as very, very clear
- 14 language which says what these standards refer to?
- MR. BURKE: Because the standards refer to
- 16 the numbers. It's a chart.
- 17 JUSTICE BREYER: Yes, but it doesn't -- for
- 18 example, suppose you buy a dozen apples every month, and
- 19 they cost you \$48 extra. You're not going to say the
- 20 ownership costs refer to the apples, even if you
- 21 decorate the car with them.
- 22 (Laughter.)
- MR. BURKE: What -- what --
- JUSTICE BREYER: I mean, ownership costs
- 25 refers to lease and loan payments. Nothing else.

- 1 JUSTICE SCALIA: What's the language we're
- 2 dealing with, Mr. Burke? Do you want to quote the
- 3 language to us?
- 4 Nobody's quoted the language. What does it
- 5 say is applicable?
- 6 MR. BURKE: What the statute says is the
- 7 applicable -- you shall get, mandatory, the applicable
- 8 amounts specified based on where the debtor resides --
- 9 JUSTICE SCALIA: Wait. The -- the
- 10 applicable amounts specified where?
- 11 MR. BURKE: In the national local standards.
- 12 JUSTICE SCALIA: Read the text of the
- 13 statute, would you, please, for me? I couldn't even get
- 14 it from your brief. You had to refer me back to the
- 15 petition. Why isn't in an appendix to your brief or
- 16 printed in the beginning of your brief, instead of
- 17 kicking me back to dig out your petition?
- 18 MR. BURKE: "The debtor's monthly expenses
- 19 shall be the debtor's applicable monthly expense amounts
- 20 specified under the national local standards."
- 21 JUSTICE SCALIA: "Amount specified under"
- 22 the standard.
- 23 MR. BURKE: Specific amount, "applicable"
- 24 modifies "amounts specified."
- JUSTICE SCALIA: "Applicable amounts

- 1 specified," not the amounts specified if applicable.
- MR. BURKE: Correct, based on where a debtor
- 3 resides.
- 4 Now, the only way a court can say that an
- 5 individual has to have a debt on a car to get this
- 6 deduction -- there's two ways: One --
- 7 JUSTICE ALITO: Look at the local standard,
- 8 which is on page 8 of the appendix to your brief, right?
- 9 And all it says is "Ownership Costs," "First Car,"
- 10 "\$471." That's the relevant text, isn't it?
- MR. BURKE: Yes.
- 12 JUSTICE ALITO: What if a person leases a
- 13 car? Do you think they get ownership costs?
- 14 MR. BURKE: Yes, because they get the cost
- 15 whether they owe on it or not.
- 16 JUSTICE ALITO: But they don't own the car,
- 17 so how can they get ownership costs?
- 18 MR. BURKE: There's a different definition.
- 19 "Ownership" doesn't mean -- it can mean possession.
- 20 But --
- 21 JUSTICE ALITO: Where do you get that, from
- 22 the --
- MR. BURKE: Black's Law Dictionary.
- 24 JUSTICE ALITO: -- from the Collection
- 25 Financial Standards?

- 1 MR. BURKE: No. The Collection Financial
- 2 Standards say you get the lease -- you get the deduction
- 3 if you have a loan or a lease payment.
- 4 JUSTICE ALITO: Where do you get the
- 5 definition that somebody who leases something owns it?
- 6 MR. BURKE: I don't. I'm not sure they do
- 7 own it.
- 8 JUSTICE ALITO: Then how do they get
- 9 ownership costs?
- 10 MR. BURKE: Because you have possession of
- 11 it. It's based on having the item. It's costs
- 12 associated with having the item, whether it's paid off
- 13 or not.
- 14 JUSTICE ALITO: If somebody rents an
- apartment, do they own the apartment?
- 16 MR. BURKE: Probably under ownership, their
- 17 possession is some type of an ownership. It may be just
- 18 possessory.
- 19 JUSTICE BREYER: Is there something wrong
- 20 with the IRS saying what they mean? It says ownership
- 21 costs means monthly loan or lease payments. Now, is
- 22 there something --
- MR. BURKE: The problem --
- JUSTICE BREYER: That's what it says it
- 25 means. Now, is there something illegal about it

- 1 defining ownership costs in that way?
- MR. BURKE: No, for the collection of taxes,
- 3 there is not. But if you're going to use -- start
- 4 digging into the manual, you might as well bring it all
- 5 into 707(b), and, as we discussed earlier, there was
- 6 language that said the collection financial analysis
- 7 should be brought in, but that was deleted in the final
- 8 version.
- 9 JUSTICE GINSBURG: Why not just -- it says
- 10 you are supposed to look at the form; it says ownership
- 11 costs. So the only thing you'd look at the IRS for
- 12 is -- the manual -- is to define ownership costs. And
- 13 they say ownership costs means those two things.
- 14 MR. BURKE: Well, I don't -- there's no
- 15 reason to limit it. If you're going to -- the text
- 16 doesn't say -- it says national local standards. It
- 17 doesn't discriminate or give disparate treatment to that
- 18 one item. If you're going to give it to one item, then
- 19 it can be pulled in, and it should be -- the same
- 20 treatment should be given to all items, and we should
- 21 have to prove some type of a --
- 22 JUSTICE GINSBURG: I don't follow that. If
- 23 the simple thing is to just -- what does the word
- 24 "costs" mean? And then you look to the IRS manual, and
- 25 it tells you that "costs" means loan or lease payments.

- 1 MR. BURKE: To collect taxes, that's how
- 2 they defined it. But in the statute it says you get
- 3 "local standard amounts specified." It does not stretch
- 4 it and say "under the IRS's interpretation." That
- 5 language was taken out. And if we were to use the IRS's
- 6 interpretation, here's the whole problem: It's
- 7 discretionary. It goes up and down. It's based on an
- 8 IRS revenue agent. It -- let me give you a separate
- 9 example. Nobody --
- 10 JUSTICE KAGAN: But, Mr. Burke, if we could
- 11 stay with this. The \$471 is derived by looking at the
- 12 average loan or lease payments nationwide. Then, in
- 13 addition to that, we know that the IRS has a separate
- 14 category for operating costs that is meant to reflect
- 15 costs of having a car that are not your loan and lease
- 16 payments. So, between those two things, why wouldn't we
- 17 say that ownership costs means your loan and lease
- 18 payments, but operating costs means your other costs of
- 19 having a car, and that you get the operating costs if
- 20 you have a car but don't make loan and lease payments,
- 21 and you get the ownership costs if you do make loan and
- lease payments?
- 23 MR. BURKE: Because to reach that, you have
- 24 to go into the Internal Revenue Manual. It's not in the
- 25 statute that says you have to owe on it to get it. And

- 1 if you go into the Internal Revenue Manual -- let's look
- 2 at operating expenses. What it says, in collecting
- 3 taxes -- and it's in the Joint Appendix at pages 83
- 4 through 88. But what it says, when it comes to local
- 5 national other expenses, an internal revenue agent has
- 6 discretion. You only get these expenses -- this is the
- 7 overall idea -- if they produce income or if it's for
- 8 health and welfare.
- And so, when we look at the Joint Appendix
- 10 page 88, section B, under the local standard
- 11 transportation expenses, when it talks about operating
- 12 costs, which is something you just mentioned, it says
- 13 you only get transportation expenses that are used to
- 14 produce income or the health and welfare of an
- 15 individual and their family.
- 16 Plus, the fact that you own a car, the IRS
- 17 under its discretion can take away the operating costs
- 18 if it's on four cinder blocks in your backyard. You're
- 19 not incurring fuel costs, mileage costs; you are not
- 20 paying probably registration or any of those other
- 21 operating costs. The IRS agent, under their manual, can
- 22 take away that expense.
- 23 So, why stop and say, well, we're just going
- 24 to look at the ownership costs? And all they're saying
- 25 here is if you owe on it, you get it; if you don't owe,

- 1 you don't get it. Let's not look at anything else in
- 2 the Internal Revenue Manual, which is a 39-part,
- 3 500-page document that in some ways is almost
- 4 incomprehensible, and direct the --
- 5 JUSTICE GINSBURG: Mr. Burke, the -- it's
- 6 unusual to allow a deduction for the purpose of
- 7 calculating disposable income although you don't have
- 8 any expense. I understand how you get to that
- 9 conclusion with respect to car ownership. Is there any
- 10 other provision that in -- in calculating disposable
- 11 income, you are allowed a deduction for an expense that
- 12 you don't incur?
- MR. BURKE: If the Court understands my view
- 14 that Congress gave --
- 15 JUSTICE GINSBURG: No. The question -- is
- 16 there anything else that works like this? You don't
- 17 have the expense, nonetheless you have the deduction?
- 18 Any -- I mean, there are a whole list of deductions,
- 19 expenses. Is there any other one that works this way?
- 20 It doesn't matter whether you have the expense, in fact.
- JUSTICE KAGAN: For example, Mr. Burke, what
- 22 would happen if you didn't actually have any
- 23 out-of-pocket medical costs? Could you still claim a
- 24 deduction for out-of-pocket medical costs?
- MR. BURKE: I'm saying you get all the

- 1 deductions, whether you owe on it or not. Is there a
- 2 specific one besides the car ownership that says you
- 3 have to owe on it? No. But my point is --
- 4 JUSTICE KENNEDY: Is that the general view
- 5 of the courts? Is the answer that you just gave
- 6 supported uniformly by the courts that have looked at
- 7 this?
- 8 MR. BURKE: There's about 60 published
- 9 cases. They are split almost 50-50, actually more --
- 10 JUSTICE KENNEDY: Even -- in other words,
- 11 even on this point, they are split?
- MR. BURKE: This is one line that they have
- 13 looked at in the cases. Basically --
- 14 JUSTICE SCALIA: I don't understand what
- 15 you're saying. He asked, are they split 50-50 on the
- 16 point that is before us here? Yes or no?
- 17 MR. BURKE: Yes, they're about 50-50.
- JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Do they apply -- do the
- 19 courts apply the housing and utilities listed amount
- 20 whether or not you pay for a house or not, whether or
- 21 not you rent?
- MR. BURKE: There's two published cases I'm
- 23 aware of, and both allowed it. One, somebody had
- 24 military housing; one, the house was paid off. Both
- 25 courts said you get it under the local standards. But

- 1 the IRS manual would not give that to you, because under
- 2 the local standards the IRS manual says you get the
- 3 specific amount or your actual payment, whatever is
- 4 less.
- 5 JUSTICE SCALIA: Of course, once again, Mr.
- 6 Burke, this is -- I don't know why you don't point this
- 7 out. This is not the difference between your position
- 8 and the position of the other side. You get the
- 9 deduction for the other side as well, whether or not you
- 10 are making the payment. Now, maybe it can be adjusted
- 11 by the trustee, but as far as the statute is concerned,
- 12 so long as you make one payment of \$1, under their
- theory you're entitled to claim the deduction; isn't
- 14 that right?
- MR. BURKE: That's correct.
- JUSTICE SCALIA: So.
- 17 JUSTICE KENNEDY: My question, incidentally,
- 18 about courts was not with reference to the car expense.
- 19 It was with reference to the hypothetical or to the
- 20 issue proposed by one of my colleagues, that said, what
- 21 if you don't -- Justice Kagan -- suppose you don't have
- 22 the medical expense. And the answer -- and your -- and
- 23 I wanted to know if your answer is supported uniformly
- 24 by the courts that have looked at this, or if there is
- 25 also a split on that point?

- 1 MR. BURKE: I apologize for not
- 2 understanding it. No, every other expense deduction
- 3 that I have seen besides the car ownership, somebody
- 4 gets it.
- 5 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: And they get it
- 6 whether or not they incur that expense or not?
- 7 MR. BURKE: Correct.
- 8 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: In other words,
- 9 food -- you don't have to say, well, he did spend this
- 10 much money on food, so he gets the standard deduction.
- MR. BURKE: Correct.
- 12 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: If he doesn't eat as
- 13 much as somebody else, he gets the same deduction,
- 14 right?
- MR. BURKE: Correct. Or if he lives at home
- 16 and mom cooks for him.
- 17 JUSTICE KAGAN: But, Mr. Burke, even you
- 18 would say -- is this correct -- that if you don't own a
- 19 car at all, you can't claim the car costs?
- MR. BURKE: Yes.
- 21 JUSTICE SCALIA: Is that -- is that by
- 22 reason of the Internal Revenue Service --
- MR. BURKE: No.
- JUSTICE SCALIA: -- manual, or is it by
- 25 reason of the Bankruptcy Code itself?

- 1 MR. BURKE: It's by reason of the Bankruptcy
- 2 Code that refers to the standards, and the standards
- 3 specifically say you have one car, no cars, and you get
- 4 a public transportation, or two cars; pick the one.
- 5 JUSTICE SCALIA: So it's in the chart --
- 6 MR. BURKE: It's in the chart.
- 7 JUSTICE SCALIA: -- that you claim -- okay.
- 8 JUSTICE ALITO: What if you own a car, but
- 9 it's completely inoperable and it has no value? You buy
- 10 it for a dollar. It's a junk car, and you're planning
- 11 possibly to restore it at some point. Do you get the
- 12 deduction then?
- 13 MR. BURKE: Based on a strict reading of the
- 14 code, you get it.
- Now, would the IRS allow it? Again, that's
- 16 a discretionary standard, but any time you have an
- 17 objective test, there's going to be line-drawing and
- 18 perceived unfairness on the outskirts.
- 19 JUSTICE KENNEDY: And would your answer be
- 20 the same if the allowance was set, the decree was made,
- 21 and -- and the debtor then went out and bought the
- 22 junker to put in his driveway just in order to get the
- 23 400-plus dollars a month, or would that be deemed an
- 24 evasion of the law that could be addressed by the
- 25 Bankruptcy Court?

- 1 MR. BURKE: It can addressed by the
- 2 Bankruptcy Court, and that's the beauty of the statute.
- 3 We don't need to go into the Internal Revenue Manual.
- 4 We just need their tables, because there's a provision,
- 5 1325(a)(3), that deals with good faith. So if it
- 6 appears somebody is not acting in good faith, then --
- JUSTICE BREYER: What is -- we've got about
- 8 half the courts in the country agreeing with you. And
- 9 so you've read all those arguments, and what in your
- 10 opinion is the best one on the point, again, where I am
- 11 stuck, which is Justice Ginsburg's original point? I
- 12 mean, I can think of millions of examples. You have a
- 13 form that says -- the employer says entertainment
- 14 expenses. Then it defines entertainment expenses as
- 15 food and transport, and they leave out movies, you know.
- 16 Or you could have vacation expenses, and vacation
- 17 expenses are defined as transport and hotel, and they
- 18 leave out meals. And here we have a definition of
- 19 ownership expenses, and they say leasing and loaning,
- and they leave out other forms of ownership.
- MR. BURKE: Because --
- JUSTICE BREYER: Now, the argument is, well,
- 23 that's what they mean by it, so that's what applicable.
- Now, what's the best argument against that in those
- 25 50 cases? Why is it trying -- why to try to get an

- 1 expense which isn't loan or lease? Have you any more
- 2 right to it than if you tried to get an expense to my
- 3 totally irrelevant apples? I mean, it doesn't fit
- 4 within the applicable definition. What's the answer?
- 5 MR. BURKE: The means test is a form, and if
- 6 you look at the form -- the means test is a form.
- JUSTICE BREYER: I've looked at the form.
- 8 MR. BURKE: If you look at the form --
- JUSTICE BREYER: Yes.
- 10 MR. BURKE: It just says --
- 11 JUSTICE BREYER: Ownership.
- MR. BURKE: That's it. There's no
- 13 definition in the form.
- 14 JUSTICE BREYER: But they -- two pages
- 15 earlier they say what they mean by the word "ownership."
- 16 MR. BURKE: Not the -- the IRS does.
- 17 JUSTICE BREYER: Yes.
- MR. BURKE: Not the statute and not the B22
- 19 form that's filled out by debtors.
- 20 JUSTICE BREYER: You say half the courts
- 21 say, oh, you just sort of imagine what ownership
- 22 expenses are, and anything that they can fall within
- 23 that general English language word is what they can
- 24 deduct; is that their approach? Because we -- you say
- 25 cut off the definition, cut off the definition from the

- 1 word "ownership"; don't use it. So what do we use to
- 2 define what ownership is?
- MR. BURKE: We don't have to. Congress gave
- 4 standard amounts for --
- JUSTICE BREYER: No, I know, but it's for
- 6 ownership; it's not for, for example, whistling. It's
- 7 for ownership. So -- so how do we define what that \$471
- 8 attaches to? Do we use a State common law definition or
- 9 something? How have they done it?
- 10 MR. BURKE: Because you can take it as a
- 11 bunch of variables. It's not in the Bankruptcy Code.
- 12 If -- so it could be replacement costs; it could be
- 13 major repairs; it could be --
- 14 JUSTICE SCALIA: Is this a problem
- 15 distinctive to your case? Doesn't the other side have
- 16 the same problem with ownership? Don't they acknowledge
- 17 that even if you are leasing the car you get the
- 18 deduction?
- MR. BURKE: Yes.
- 20 JUSTICE SCALIA: I don't see why this is
- 21 distinctive to your case. It's a problem both sides
- 22 face. And we don't avoid it by coming out against you,
- 23 do we?
- MR. BURKE: No, we don't.
- JUSTICE BREYER: Why?

- 1 JUSTICE ALITO: What if -- what if the
- 2 definition of --
- JUSTICE BREYER: Why don't we?
- 4 JUSTICE ALITO: -- ownership costs was moved
- 5 into the local standards themselves? Would the outcome
- 6 be different then?
- 7 MR. BURKE: Are you saying in 707(b)?
- 8 JUSTICE ALITO: No. It's moved from the CFS
- 9 to the local standards, which are referred to in the --
- 10 in the code provision.
- 11 MR. BURKE: My answer would still be the
- 12 same because that's not a congressional formula. That's
- 13 a form that comes off the Department of Justice Website
- 14 which administers the U.S. Trustee's program and that's
- 15 their litigation position.
- JUSTICE KAGAN: But, Mr. Burke, if the table
- 17 said loan and lease costs, you wouldn't have a case? If
- 18 it said -- instead of ownership costs, if it said loan
- 19 and lease costs, then you would sit down and you would
- 20 say I'm not entitled to that deduction?
- 21 MR. BURKE: No. I would say an individual
- 22 who owns a car, whether they owe or not, gets the
- 23 deduction because it's part of this aggregate standard.
- JUSTICE KAGAN: Even if it's called loan and
- 25 lease costs?

- 1 MR. BURKE: Correct. It's not a breakdown
- 2 on what any one individual has. It's an aggregate.
- 3 JUSTICE GINSBURG: You may want to save the
- 4 rest of your time for rebuttal.
- 5 MR. BURKE: Thank you. I will.
- 6 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you, counsel.
- 7 Ms. Maynard.
- 8 ORAL ARGUMENT OF DEANNE E. MAYNARD
- 9 ON BEHALF OF THE RESPONDENT
- 10 MS. MAYNARD: Mr. Chief Justice, and may it
- 11 please the Court:
- 12 The Bankruptcy Code precludes an above-
- 13 median-income debtor like Petitioner from shielding from
- 14 his creditors \$471 a month for a car payment that he
- 15 does not have. A debtor with --
- 16 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: -- food costs, housing
- 17 costs, utility costs, by getting his parents to pay for
- 18 those things and still take this deduction?
- 19 MS. MAYNARD: The statute allows a debtor to
- 20 take an applicable monthly expense amount. So if the
- 21 debtor truly has no food costs, then the food standard
- 22 would be not applicable to the debtor, so --
- 23 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Your adversary said that
- 24 only two courts have addressed this issue and have
- 25 permitted those deductions. So under what reasoning

- 1 would we apply a different standard to the car costs as
- 2 opposed to those other costs?
- 3 MS. MAYNARD: Well, I think, with respect --
- 4 I think the cases he was talking about were housing.
- JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Housing.
- 6 MS. MAYNARD: Right. So housing and car
- 7 costs are part of the local standards. Food, clothing,
- 8 house cleaning supplies, those are part of the national
- 9 standards. The -- in our view, the text that goes along
- 10 with -- accompanies the tables, which is not the
- 11 Internal Revenue Manual -- it's just the pages reprinted
- 12 at 1a to 3a of our brief. The Collection Financial
- 13 Standards, the prefatory explanation for what the tables
- 14 mean. In our view, that is -- goes along with --
- incorporated into the national local standards.
- 16 The national standards, Justice Sotomayor,
- 17 are allowed, as long as you have under the calculations
- 18 -- as explained in the standards, under the national
- 19 standards, a debtor would receive the allowance in the
- 20 table as long as they have any such expense, so
- 21 regardless of amount. However, if they have no such
- 22 expense, then they are taken out by the statutory
- 23 language in the means test, which says that the
- 24 standards must be applicable to the debtor. And --
- 25 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: So if they have

- 1 pre-purchased their food expenses, so long as they have
- 2 \$1 of food expense they get the entire expense even
- 3 though they're not incurring it?
- 4 MS. MAYNARD: If they are --
- 5 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: And there are things
- 6 like, you can pay up, you know, have the grocery deliver
- 7 your food every month and you can pay in advance, and if
- 8 you're paid up, you still get the full food expense that
- 9 is allowed?
- 10 MS. MAYNARD: No, Your Honor. I think if,
- 11 over the 60-month period looking forward, you know, that
- 12 you're going to -- you've already paid up for your food
- 13 for the next 60 months and you're not going to incur any
- 14 additional food expenses, no, then in that situation the
- 15 standard would be inapplicable to you. You would be
- 16 having no -- in that hypothetical --
- 17 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: But if you paid \$1
- 18 for food, you'd get the full amount for 60 months?
- 19 MS. MAYNARD: Under the standard. That's
- 20 the way the standards operate, Your Honor.
- I haven't seen any cases litigated over food
- 22 expense --
- 23 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: So your argument
- leads to a result that's just as absurd as your
- 25 colleague's result on the other side.

1	MS. MAYNARD: I don't believe so, Your
2	Honor, because
3	CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: I mean, that was a
4	big part of your argument. You said his position leads
5	to an absurd result, and yours is just as absurd.
6	MS. MAYNARD: I don't think so, Your Honor,
7	for this reason, which is that the national standards
8	are food, clothing, house cleaning supplies, things that
9	you expect every debtor to have. You don't see much
10	litigation about those expenses. The local standards,
11	however, operate differently. In our view and our
12	view's different from the Government's, Justice Scalia.
13	In our view, under the local standards and the way that
14	they apply as explained in the Collection Financial
15	Standards, is that the debtor is allowed their actual
16	expense for the local standard or the amount in the
17	table, whichever is less. So in the hypothetical
18	JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Where does it say that?
19	MS. MAYNARD: In our
20	JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: The debtor's monthly
21	expenses shall be the debtor's applicable monthly
22	expense amounts specified under the national and local
23	standards. So the national and local standards have
24	amounts listed. Where does it say you take only the
25	actual, not the national or local standard?

- 1 MS. MAYNARD: I read that text, Your
- 2 Honor -- again, the Court doesn't need to decide this
- 3 maximum cap issue to decide this case, because the
- 4 Petitioner has no expense whatsoever, and so it's not
- 5 applicable to him.
- 6 But in our view, Justice Sotomayor -- in our
- 7 view, you get it from the language of the statute that
- 8 says the debtor's applicable monthly expense amounts
- 9 specified under the national standards and local
- 10 standards. And the way that we understand the national
- 11 and local standards to work is, if you look at page --
- 12 it's explained on page 1a of the petition to our brief,
- 13 the red brief. Maximum allowance -- it's the third
- 14 paragraph down: "Maximum allowances for housing and
- 15 utilities and transportation, known as the Local
- 16 Standards, vary by location. Unlike the National
- 17 Standards, the taxpayer is allowed the amount actually
- 18 spent or the standard, whichever is less."
- 19 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: But that's -- but that's
- 20 not what the provision at issue here says. It says you
- 21 use the amount specified under the national standards,
- 22 and you use actual for everything else. That's what the
- 23 statute says. So now you're trying to move the actual
- 24 into the first half of the text?
- MS. MAYNARD: No, Your Honor, that's not how

- 1 I understand the text. The text provides --
- 2 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Why would you even
- 3 bother? Why don't you -- if -- if what you're arguing
- 4 is that only actual expenses are -- are what you can
- 5 claim, you wouldn't need the first half.
- 6 MS. MAYNARD: Yes, you would, Your Honor,
- 7 because what the -- what the statute's purpose here is
- 8 -- I mean, I think it's helpful to step back.
- 9 Chapter 13 sends one to chapter 7's means
- 10 test for the purpose of calculating the amounts
- 11 reasonably necessary for the maintenance and support of
- 12 the debtor. And Congress chose to import the -- the
- 13 methodology of the national standards and local
- 14 standards as a way both to set the categories of
- 15 expenses that debtors could receive payments for, and,
- 16 with the case of the national and local standards, to
- 17 set the amounts. They were worried about capping upper
- 18 discretion because Congress -- it's quite clear from the
- 19 text and the legislative history -- was concerned about
- 20 above-median-income debtors taking luxurious expense
- 21 amounts.
- 22 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: So what you would have
- 23 the statute read is: The debtor's monthly expenses
- 24 shall be the debtor's applicable monthly expense amounts
- 25 specified, as a -- as a maximum. You would have to add

- 1 "maximum" somewhere there.
- MS. MAYNARD: No, Your Honor, because the
- 3 amount under the national standards, as the national
- 4 standards operate, is the -- is an allowance, not an
- 5 actual, and the amount under the local standards, as
- 6 they operate, is the amount actually spent or the amount
- 7 in the table, whichever is less. And, again --
- 8 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Your -- your
- 9 position penalizes debtors who pay their expenses in
- 10 advance, who don't incur additional debt to pay for
- 11 things like their car. I would have thought the
- 12 Bankruptcy Code would think that's a good thing, that
- 13 they're not incurring debt that they can't afford to pay
- 14 off, but instead, to the extent they can, they're paying
- 15 expenses in advance. Why should somebody who does that
- 16 be in a worse position than somebody -- than somebody
- 17 who takes out a loan they can't afford to pay back?
- 18 MS. MAYNARD: Money is fungible, Your Honor,
- 19 so to the extent the debtor has incurred expenses before
- 20 going into bankruptcy instead of, as here, paying off
- 21 this more than \$85,000 in credit card debt, shouldn't be
- 22 able to --
- 23 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Well, he hasn't
- 24 incurred -- he hasn't incurred expenses. It's the whole
- 25 point, I guess, that he's paid for something.

- MS. MAYNARD: He used his money, perhaps, to
- 2 purchase his car outright, instead of to pay down his
- 3 credit card debt, and so he has a salary of \$50,000, and
- 4 he has a credit card debt of \$85,000, and he owns a
- 5 2-year car -- 2-year-old car outright. He should not be
- 6 able to deduct, as a measure of his reasonably necessary
- 7 expenses for his maintenance and support over the next
- 8 50 months, \$28,000 that he doesn't need for a car
- 9 payment that he doesn't make.
- JUSTICE BREYER: You're --
- 11 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Even though he can
- 12 do it -- even though he can do it for everything else --
- 13 he can do it for food, he can do it for housekeeping
- 14 expenses, he can do it for personal care expenses, he
- 15 can even do it -- the other, the final category is
- 16 miscellaneous, so he can do it for anything.
- 17 MS. MAYNARD: Well, the miscellaneous, all
- 18 those numbers are capped, and the legislative history
- 19 makes clear Congress thought all those numbers would
- 20 actually effectively act as caps. In other words, to
- 21 the extent there was debate in the Congress, Congress
- 22 was concerned that these numbers were actually too low,
- 23 not that they were going to give anybody a windfall.
- 24 But to the extent --
- JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: So what you're proposing

- 1 is that every debtor has to go to the Bankruptcy Court
- 2 and show what their monthly food bills have been over
- 3 what period of time, how much their personal supplies
- 4 have been over what period of time? How can you
- 5 calculate forward what they are going to spend on a
- 6 monthly basis for each of those items? Isn't that the
- 7 reason the tables are used, so that you don't have to do
- 8 that?
- 9 MS. MAYNARD: Yes, Your Honor, and in the
- 10 national standards, which all the items you just list
- 11 are national standards, under the national standards you
- 12 don't do the actuals. On page 1a, it explains:
- 13 "Allowances for food, clothing and other items, known as
- 14 the National Standards, apply nationwide except for
- 15 Alaska and Hawaii.... Taxpayers are allowed the total
- 16 National Standards amount for their family size and
- 17 income level, without questioning amounts actually
- 18 spent."
- 19 For -- yes, for those hard-to-calculate
- 20 items, you do -- our position is you do get the amounts
- 21 in the chart. For local standards -- the local
- 22 standards, however, which include home, mortgage, lease
- 23 expenses, utilities, and transportation, which include
- 24 both ownership costs and operating costs, you get the
- 25 actual or whichever is less.

- 1 JUSTICE SCALIA: I must say your position is
- 2 more logical than the position that you read in some of
- 3 the instructions applicable to the -- to the chart
- 4 that's referred to in the Bankruptcy Code, but not
- 5 others. I mean, it seems to me, if you're going to read
- 6 in the requirement that have to have made a lease
- 7 payment, you should also read in the requirement that
- 8 you're referring to now, which would mean your deduction
- 9 is limited by the -- by the amount of your lease
- 10 payment.
- I don't see why -- is there any reason why
- one would read in the other one and not read in yours?
- 13 MS. MAYNARD: Not in our view, Your Honor,
- 14 because in our view the chart is -- is ambiguous about
- 15 what the number stands for. And so in the national
- 16 standards, the text, the prefatory text, explains that
- 17 the amount is an allowance if you have the expense. In
- 18 the local standards, the prefatory text explains that
- 19 the amount operates as a cap.
- 20 But the important point for this case, Your
- 21 Honor, is that you don't have to decide anything about
- 22 the national standards because Petitioner is left at the
- 23 statutory door. He has no applicable monthly expense
- 24 amount for operating --
- JUSTICE KAGAN: Ms. Maynard, what would

- 1 happen if the debtor had a car that was 200,000 miles
- 2 old -- 200,000 miles, and it was going to break down,
- 3 you know, within the next 5 years? Would the debtor
- 4 then be able to take the deduction?
- 5 MS. MAYNARD: If the debtor owns the car
- 6 outright at the time they file for bankruptcy, they
- 7 would not get the deduction.
- 8 JUSTICE KAGAN: Even though if you look
- 9 ahead, if you project forward, it's pretty clear that
- 10 the debtor is going to have to incur those expenses?
- 11 MS. MAYNARD: They would not get the
- 12 deduction under this calculation. However, under this
- 13 Court's decision in Lanning, when one goes to project
- 14 the disposable income, it's conceivable that the debtor
- 15 could prove that it's known or virtually certain that
- 16 they will need a new car and that that could be
- 17 accounted for.
- But -- but also the Bankruptcy Code in 1329
- 19 allows for modification of a plan, and so when the time
- 20 arises that their car conks out and they need a new car,
- 21 they can move to modify their plan. I think it's --
- 22 JUSTICE KAGAN: Well, the modification works
- 23 for chapter 13, but it doesn't work for chapter 7; is
- 24 that right?
- MS. MAYNARD: Well, they make that statement

- in their reply brief, Your Honor, but I'm not sure
- 2 exactly what they mean by that, because in chapter 7
- 3 this test is being used for a very different purpose.
- 4 It's the gateway; it's a presumptive test for abuse.
- 5 And so, again, our reading makes perfect sense in that
- 6 context because what you want to know is, does this
- 7 debtor actually have moneys it can prepay its creditors,
- 8 should it be --
- JUSTICE BREYER: The -- sorry. Are you
- 10 finished?
- 11 MS. MAYNARD: I was -- I actually haven't
- 12 answered the question.
- 13 JUSTICE BREYER: Go ahead.
- 14 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Why don't you finish
- 15 answering the question?
- JUSTICE BREYER: Finish, yes.
- 17 MS. MAYNARD: So, in chapter 7, once you --
- 18 if you decide it's presumptively --- not presumptively
- 19 abusive, and you stay in chapter 7, then chapter 7 is a
- 20 liquidation. There's no ongoing plan. So I -- all of
- 21 your nonexempt assets are liquidated, your creditors are
- 22 paid off, and then you are discharged. If 3 years from
- 23 now your car conks out, you're just like you and me; you
- 24 are not in bankruptcy, you just -- you try to make do.
- 25 JUSTICE BREYER: I think it is -- well, I'm

- 1 trying to work out what was his point. And I don't
- 2 blame him for this. But trying to figure it out, he
- 3 says look: This whole thing was written for a different
- 4 purpose than the IRS, and if we start reading all those
- 5 things from the beginning into the tables, we're really
- 6 going to get into a mess. For example, we are going to
- 7 give people deductions when they have lease payments,
- 8 even though they're not owners when they have lease
- 9 payments. The company owns -- not even an ownership
- 10 expense, but it does say use the lease payment. And
- 11 then it has all these other things.
- 12 So forget it; do a simple thing. It says
- ownership expense. You go to the registry of motor
- 14 vehicles and you say, is Smith the owner? And they'll
- 15 tell you, yes or no. And if the answer is yes, he
- 16 deducts \$471. Sometimes that's too little; sometimes
- 17 that's too much. But once we depart from that, we're
- 18 really in a nightmare of trying to figure out what all
- 19 these things mean that were written for other purposes.
- 20 So, what do you say to that?
- MS. MAYNARD: I say, Justice Breyer, that
- 22 there's nothing in the statute or the legislative
- 23 history that suggests this was meant to be an overall
- 24 budget for above-median-income debtors. This was about
- 25 capping upper discretion and limiting the expenses

- 1 available as reasonably necessary expenses for
- 2 above-median-income debtors.
- 3 And I think that point is made perfectly
- 4 clear by the fact that if you can compare it to what
- 5 happens now to a below-median-income debtor, a
- 6 below-median-income debtor in the same situation as
- 7 Petitioner, who owns his car outright, would be allowed
- 8 no amount as an expense for his vehicle, because he
- 9 doesn't have an actual expense that's reasonably
- 10 necessary.
- 11 And I think that the 2005 Congress would
- 12 think it was a senseless result, as they argue here,
- 13 that Petitioner gets \$471, above-median-income debtor,
- 14 the very class of debtors with whom Congress was
- 15 concerned in the 2005 amendments, to shield from his
- 16 creditors over the life of the plan when he has no
- 17 comparable expense.
- 18 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Do you think that --
- 19 JUSTICE KENNEDY: What we are talking about
- 20 is a paradigm of someone -- we're comparing someone who
- 21 has a \$470-a-month car payment and he gets -- and he
- 22 gets the deduction. Why is that, in light of the second
- 23 sentence -- let's see, the third sentence of the
- 24 statute, which says, "Notwithstanding any other
- 25 provision of this clause, the monthly expenses of the

- 1 debtor shall not include any payments for debts." I
- 2 mean, that would be the car company.
- And has -- has that point been litigated?
- 4 MS. MAYNARD: That -- that sentence is
- 5 somewhat of a conundrum, Your Honor, and I think that
- 6 the Court doesn't need to decide the meaning here,
- 7 because whatever it does, it doesn't get Petitioner
- 8 within the Romanette ii calculations --
- JUSTICE KENNEDY: No -- no, but it would --
- 10 MS. MAYNARD: -- because he has no payment.
- 11 JUSTICE KENNEDY: It would eliminate the
- 12 anomaly that -- one of the principal anomalies. There
- 13 are many anomalies in each position. It would eliminate
- 14 one of the principal asymmetries that seems to concern
- 15 the counsel and the Court.
- MS. MAYNARD: Well, my understanding of that
- 17 provision is that it serves two purposes.
- JUSTICE KENNEDY: That it?
- 19 MS. MAYNARD: Serves two purposes. The
- 20 first is that it makes clear -- in the back of our
- 21 brief, we have the other necessary expenses from the
- 22 IRM. And on -- near the back, page 25a, two of the
- 23 categories of other necessary expenses are secured or
- 24 legally perfected debts and unsecured debts.
- 25 So I think the -- the otherwise -- the

- 1 "notwithstanding" sentence makes clear that Romanette ii
- 2 should not capture those other unsecured debts and
- 3 secured debts, that it's the very purpose of this whole
- 4 calculation to figure out how much money you have to pay
- 5 those things.
- 6 The second purpose the sentence serves is to
- 7 make sure that there is no double-counting, because
- 8 Romanette iii, the very next provision in the means
- 9 test, allows the debtor to claim monthly payments for
- 10 secured debts. Now, many car loans are probably secured
- 11 debts, and in our view if you actually have a car loan
- 12 -- now, remember again, he neither has a car loan, nor a
- 13 car lease payment, nor any kind of ownership payment.
- 14 But if -- if one actually did have a car
- 15 loan that was secured by the car, which I think is the
- 16 vast majority of car loans, in our view the debtor
- 17 expenses nothing for that under Romanette ii, and only
- 18 the actual amount of that debt under Romanette iii.
- 19 JUSTICE GINSBURG: I thought the -- the
- 20 general position was you get either the actual payment
- 21 or the 471, of whichever is higher.
- MS. MAYNARD: Whichever is less.
- 23 I think that -- that's my understanding of
- 24 how the local standards work, Your Honor. I think,
- 25 then, as a practical matter, that really will end up

- 1 only applying to car leases with respect to
- 2 transportation ownership costs, because I think that the
- 3 "notwithstanding" sentence removes secured car loans
- 4 from Romanette ii and has them calculated under
- 5 Romanette iii, where there is no comparable cap.
- 6 And the -- but -- but the point at issue in
- 7 this case doesn't involve the interaction between
- 8 Romanette ii and Romanette iii, because no matter how
- 9 those two things interact, when the debtor has no
- 10 payment whatsoever, he ought not to be able to claim any
- 11 car ownership costs, because what we're trying to figure
- 12 out is what amount does he reasonably need for his
- 13 maintenance and support? And this question is a very
- 14 important question. This scenario happens a lot.
- 15 In the 2007 study that U.S. Trustees did at
- 16 Congress's request to which Petitioner cites in his
- 17 reply brief, the average overpayment of a debtor in
- 18 claiming this transportation ownership expense was \$335,
- 19 which is a lot when you're talking about the standard in
- 20 the chart being 471. There are many debtors who are
- 21 getting this expense either above their amount or when
- 22 they have no such expense at all, and so even if the
- 23 Court doesn't resolve these other issues that are
- 24 implicated by this case, the decision here is a simple
- one, which is: This debtor has no applicable monthly

- 1 expense amount for transportation ownership costs, and
- 2 he shouldn't be allowed to expense any amount for that.
- If there are no further questions, the
- 4 Respondent requests the Court would affirm the judgment
- 5 below.
- 6 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you, counsel.
- 7 Ms. Saharsky.
- 8 ORAL ARGUMENT OF NICOLE A. SAHARSKY,
- 9 ON BEHALF OF THE UNITED STATES, AS AMICUS CURIAE,
- 10 SUPPORTING RESPONDENT
- 11 MS. SAHARSKY: Mr. Chief Justice, and may it
- 12 please the Court:
- The only question this Court needs to
- 14 resolve in this case is whether the vehicle ownership
- 15 expense is applicable to Petitioner. The answer is no.
- 16 The ownership cost is for loan and lease
- 17 payments, the cost to acquiring the vehicle, and he just
- 18 doesn't have any payments of that type. To allow him to
- 19 pretend that he does would create absurd results. He'd
- 20 be able to shield approximately \$28,000 from his
- 21 unsecured creditors, and he'd be better off than lower
- 22 income chapter 13 debtors. And we just don't think that
- 23 that's a result that Congress intended. We don't think
- 24 it --
- 25 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: And if he paid --

- JUSTICE KENNEDY: Well, I -- excuse me,
- 2 Chief Justice.
- 3 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: If he paid a dollar,
- 4 he would be able to shield \$27,999, and you're
- 5 comfortable with that result?
- 6 MS. SAHARSKY: Well, that goes to the
- 7 question of whether the amount in the table is the
- 8 amount to be used or a cap on actual expenses. In our
- 9 view, it is --
- 10 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: And I understood
- 11 your brief to say it was the amount -- you get the whole
- 12 amount, not simply as a cap.
- 13 MS. SAHARSKY: That's right. Now, of
- 14 course, we haven't seen -- the executive office for
- 15 U.S. Trustees has not seen any \$1 payments. It doesn't
- 16 know of any such commercially available payments. It
- 17 suspects the payments would be --
- 18 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: If the point of the
- 19 \$1, counsel, is to lead to the extreme hypothetical that
- 20 would flesh out your position, what if it were \$10,000
- 21 and the amount would give him \$30,000? The trustees
- 22 have probably seen loans like that.
- 23 MS. SAHARSKY: What I'm saying, Your Honor,
- 24 is that there are many circumstances in which an expense
- 25 amount is a standard amount, but you still need to make

- 1 a threshold showing that it's applicable to you.
- 2 And if I could give the Court one example:
- 3 When an individual does his Federal income tax forms,
- 4 you can take a deduction for your dependents, but you
- 5 can't just take a deduction for any child you have. You
- 6 have to take a deduction -- you can take a deduction if
- 7 the person lives at home with you for more than 1 year
- 8 and have you a certain amount of expenses to support
- 9 them, and that is a standard deduction that you get on
- 10 your tax forms. The IRS doesn't ask everyone to figure
- 11 out their actual costs.
- 12 It is the case in real life that there are
- 13 allowance amounts that are average amounts that are
- 14 given to people once they meet the criteria. And that's
- 15 what we are saying happens here.
- 16 Now, that is, again, only a disagreement as
- 17 to what you do with people who actually have vehicle
- 18 ownership expenses.
- 19 JUSTICE SCALIA: Why aren't -- why isn't one
- 20 of the criteria the -- the provision that says maximum
- 21 allowances for housing and utilities and transportation,
- 22 known as the local standards, vary by location, and
- 23 unlike the national standards, the taxpayer is allowed
- 24 the amount actually spent or the standard, whichever is
- 25 less? Why doesn't that apply?

- 1 MS. SAHARSKY: Well, because, Your Honor, in
- 2 that case it's the IRS commentary we are referring to
- 3 that's on page 1a of the red brief appendix.
- 4 JUSTICE SCALIA: Right.
- 5 MS. SAHARSKY: And that -- what that's
- 6 referring to is -- it says the amount actually spent or
- 7 the standard. And that's distinguishing between the
- 8 amount that's actually spent or the standard, which is
- 9 the standard --
- 10 JUSTICE SCALIA: Right.
- 11 MS. SAHARSKY: -- amount in the table.
- 12 Right.
- 13 And of course, we look to what -- the text
- 14 that Congress enacted in the Bankruptcy Code, and that
- 15 says that the debtor's monthly expenses shall be the
- 16 debtor's applicable monthly expense amounts specified
- 17 under the national standards and local standards.
- JUSTICE SCALIA: It's not applicable. It's
- 19 not applicable if, in fact, you haven't spent that much.
- 20 Just as you claim it's not applicable if you have no
- 21 payment at all.
- 22 MS. SAHARSKY: I think that it is -- it
- 23 would further Congress's purposes to say that you
- 24 have to -- that you look to the actual costs that the
- 25 debtor has. But we just don't think the text goes that

- 1 far, because it says that if the expense amounts -- the
- 2 category is applicable to the debtor, that then you use
- 3 the expense amounts specified under the table. But --
- 4 JUSTICE KENNEDY: No, but the -- but the
- 5 gravamen of Justice Scalia's question is: Why are you
- 6 running away from 1a, which is what Respondent's counsel
- 7 relied on? And if that were clearly relevant to this
- 8 statute, it would seem to me to answer the question.
- 9 Are you saying we -- we don't look at this
- 10 because it's just simply an interpretation; it's not a
- 11 regulation? What is -- what is -- in your view, what
- 12 effect do we give to this language that Justice Scalia
- 13 quoted? Nothing at all?
- 14 MS. SAHARSKY: It would not be relevant in
- 15 the bankruptcy context, in our view, and the reason is
- 16 because the -- the statutory text refers to the
- 17 standards. And in our view, you can look to the IRS
- 18 commentary to see what the standards mean, what their
- 19 scope is, as Justice Breyer was discussing with his
- 20 apples hypothetical.
- 21 But this additional language is guidance to
- 22 IRS agents in tax delinquency cases about how to collect
- 23 taxes. As Petitioners --
- JUSTICE KENNEDY: Suppose we -- suppose we
- 25 think the word "applicable" is ambiguous and difficult

- 1 to construe. Do we then look at this language at 1a, or
- 2 do you say it's irrelevant in all -- in all respects?
- MS. SAHARSKY: You -- Your Honor, you could
- 4 look at this language, but we think that it reflects not
- 5 the standards, but what -- how the IRS uses the
- 6 standards in individual cases of tax delinquency.
- 7 To the extent that the IRS is defining what
- 8 the standards are, what the scope of the standards are
- 9 -- for example, that ownership costs are loan and lease
- 10 payments -- of course, we would think that you would
- 11 look to that, but this additional quidance to IRS agents
- 12 we don't think is what Congress meant when it said
- 13 "expense amounts specified under the standards."
- 14 But we do think that the text could be read
- 15 the way you suggest.
- 16 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: So then you would be
- 17 comfortable with a person who owns a house outright, who
- 18 only pays \$100 in utilities, taking the full amount of
- 19 the housing and utilities allowable living expenses
- 20 because that's the amount that's specified?
- MS. SAHARSKY: Well, the housing and
- 22 utilities expenses have been broken out into a mortgage
- 23 and rent component and a utilities component. So in
- 24 that circumstance, we would say the individual only is
- 25 allowed the utilities component, but it would be the

- 1 allowance amount that is specified. It would not be his
- 2 actual amount.
- But, again, this is a question that was not
- 4 considered by the courts below. In fact, the bankruptcy
- 5 appellate panel said it is -- in footnote 20 of its
- 6 brief, said this question is not in this case; it's not
- 7 before us whether you use the amounts in the table or
- 8 whether you use the actual amounts. And we don't think
- 9 --
- 10 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Ms. Saharsky, I
- 11 should -- I should probably know this, but if you do
- 12 have amounts that are excluded from the disposable
- income because of car ownership, in other words, you
- 14 actually have, in your point of view, expenses, do they
- 15 have to go to the -- pay off the car loan or are they
- 16 available for everybody? All the creditors?
- 17 MS. SAHARSKY: They're not available for the
- 18 creditors. The idea behind this calculation is that
- 19 there, of course, are secured debts that have priority,
- 20 and then this calculation is used to figure out how much
- 21 money is left to pay unsecured creditors. And the idea
- 22 is that the debtor has certain expenses, that he needs
- 23 to keep money for himself so he can continue with the
- 24 everyday business of life. For example, the car
- 25 ownership payment is designed to ensure that a vehicle

- 1 can still use and have access to a car, and if someone
- 2 has a loan or lease payment, they need to be able to
- 3 continue making that payment in bankruptcy, but if they
- 4 don't have any such payment, then they don't have this
- 5 need for this additional fund because --
- 6 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: But can he decide --
- 7 let's say he has more food expense than is allowed. Can
- 8 he decide of the amount that would otherwise go for the
- 9 car payment that he's going to pay some of that for the
- 10 food expenses?
- MS. SAHARSKY: Well, certainly the
- 12 Bankruptcy Court doesn't scrutinize, you know, what
- 13 happens to that regard. What it's just trying to do is
- 14 figure out the disposable income that is available to
- 15 pay unsecured creditors, that the debtor doesn't need.
- 16 And I should just note with respect to this
- 17 question of whether there is an overall budget that the
- 18 debtor is allowed, you know, that's certainly not the
- 19 case in any of the other provisions that follow this
- 20 applicable monthly standards and local standards. You
- 21 have the actual other necessary expenses, actual
- 22 continuation of taking care of chronically ill family
- 23 members. And Petitioner himself acknowledges that he
- 24 has to show that he has a car. So it's not the case
- 25 that every debtor is just getting some set amount of

- 1 money to do what they will with. Congress has
- 2 referenced the standards. The standards break this out
- 3 into certain expenses. It says just take the applicable
- 4 ones. And we just don't think it makes sense to
- 5 interpret "applicable" in that circumstance to --
- 6 JUSTICE KAGAN: Ms. Saharsky, could you
- 7 explain to me the Government's position on when a debtor
- 8 with loan and lease payments gets to deduct them under
- 9 Romanette ii? In other words, this goes back to Justice
- 10 Kennedy's question, the notwithstanding clause and
- 11 whether the notwithstanding clause effectively excludes
- 12 all loan and lease payments from Romanette ii?
- MS. SAHARSKY: It does not have that effect,
- 14 Your Honor. What it does is to take out the actual debt
- 15 payments that are part of the other necessary
- 16 expenses -- these are on page 25a of the red brief --
- 17 that counsel on our side mentioned. These are other
- 18 necessary expenses that are actual debt payments, and
- 19 the local and national standards are expense amounts.
- 20 We don't think that Congress defined those to be debt
- 21 payments.
- 22 So the function of the payments for debts
- 23 language, we agree with Respondent's counsel, would be
- 24 twofold. First, it would excise the other necessary
- 25 expenses that actually are debt payments, which makes

- 1 complete sense. One of them is an unsecured debt
- 2 payment, and you wouldn't want to consider that one of
- 3 your expenses because the whole point of the calculation
- 4 is to figure out how much money you have left to pay
- 5 unsecured debt. And then the other function that it
- 6 serves is in Romanette iii because you were getting
- 7 secured debt payments there to not double-count them in
- 8 Romanette ii.
- 9 JUSTICE KAGAN: But, in other words, the
- 10 loan and lease payments don't count as debt for purposes
- of the notwithstanding clause; they count as expense
- 12 amounts?
- MS. SAHARSKY: We say that those are expense
- 14 amounts that are specified. They're not payments for
- 15 debts. I should note, because Justice Kennedy asked
- 16 this question, that this was not something that was
- 17 relied upon by the courts below. I don't believe that
- 18 there's any definitive court of appeals opinion that
- 19 goes through in detail what that provision is designed
- 20 to do. So I would urge this Court that it need not
- 21 resolve it in this case and instead do what the court of
- 22 appeals did, which is to say that, just looking at the
- 23 plain text, the word "applicable" means not everybody
- 24 can get these amounts in the national and local
- 25 standards, and it needs to be someone who actually has

- 1 those payment amounts. The whole point of this part of
- 2 this statute is to figure out what money is available to
- 3 pay unsecured creditors, and it's payments that need to
- 4 be made for expenses that matter. It's not whether the
- 5 individual debtor has a car.
- I also note, just because it came up earlier
- 7 and is a very important point, that to the extent that
- 8 the Court only wants to look at the tables to figure out
- 9 what are ownership costs, are they loan and lease
- 10 payments, just looking at the title of the table,
- 11 Ownership Costs, you need to have costs. Looking at the
- 12 fact that there are two different ones -- there's
- ownership costs as opposed to operating costs -- makes
- 14 clear that some of the things that Petitioner suggests
- 15 might be ownership costs are, in fact, operating costs.
- 16 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you, counsel.
- 17 Mr. Burke, have you 4 minutes remaining.
- 18 REBUTTAL ARGUMENT OF CHRISTOPHER P. BURKE
- 19 ON BEHALF OF THE PETITIONER
- MR. BURKE: Thank you.
- The means test knows when to say "actual"
- 22 when it wants to say "actual." It didn't say "actual"
- 23 in this case; it said "applicable."
- JUSTICE GINSBURG: Mr. Burke, would you
- 25 explain one facet of this case to me? Given the

- 1 deduction, the \$471 deduction, disposable -- projected
- 2 disposable income comes down to \$210?
- 3 MR. BURKE: Correct.
- 4 JUSTICE GINSBURG: As opposed to -- it would
- 5 be 600 some dollars if you didn't count the \$471?
- 6 MR. BURKE: Correct.
- 7 JUSTICE GINSBURG: Even though the
- 8 disposable income figure was \$210, the debtor was
- 9 willing -- the debtor proposed paying \$500. Why did the
- 10 debtor come up with a \$500 figure when projected
- 11 disposable income without the car ownership would be --
- if he gets the car ownership, would only be \$210?
- 13 MR. BURKE: This is exactly why our view of
- 14 the law works. The means test is a minimum amount.
- 15 It's a bottom-line quick figure based on standard
- 16 deductions. It was \$200 based on our calculation if
- 17 he's given his deductions based on age, location, et
- 18 cetera.
- 19 We then go back to I and J, and J, which is
- 20 on page 44 of the Joint Appendix, is his current
- 21 expenses. And if we look at line 13A, there is no
- 22 vehicle payment. He's not taking \$471. He took his
- 23 income and expense. The bottom line was 500. He knew
- 24 he had to pay at least 200. He's willing to pay the
- 25 500. He's not getting a \$471 deduction because there is

- 1 no car payment on his Schedule J.
- 2 And if we look at the formula that way, the
- 3 means test is a general form to give standard
- 4 deductions, to give us a quick bottom line, and the
- 5 debtor is either going to pay that amount or more based
- 6 on his income and expense, and he would pay more if he
- 7 really didn't have that expense. So if he didn't have a
- 8 rent expense of \$1,000 a month, it would show up on
- 9 Schedule J that he didn't have 1,000, so his payment
- 10 would go to \$1,500 a month. That's the good faith
- 11 that's involved in this case.
- 12 JUSTICE SCALIA: It would have to go to
- 13 1,500 a month, or he, out of the goodness of his heart,
- 14 would decide to pay that amount?
- MR. BURKE: He's going to have to pay an
- 16 amount of at least \$200.
- 17 JUSTICE SCALIA: Right.
- 18 MR. BURKE: It would be hard to confirm a
- 19 case if he doesn't pay somewhere in that range.
- JUSTICE SCALIA: Fine. So why -- why would
- 21 we assume that he -- I don't know -- your client is an
- 22 extraordinarily generous fellow. I don't think most
- 23 people, when they go through bankruptcy, are going to
- 24 cough up any more than they have to.
- MR. BURKE: It's the only way for the form

- 1 and the law to work. The means test is a bottom-line
- 2 number. If you don't have one of those expenses, it
- 3 shows up on Schedule J, and it gives you a number. If
- 4 it's higher, we think you should probably pay it or in
- 5 that range. If it's lower, Congress isn't saying you
- 6 get away with it; it says you get out of chapter 13 if
- 7 you're not going to pay this amount. So the formula is
- 8 just to come up with a bottom line. Nobody is shielding
- 9 anything. It's all black and white on his current
- 10 expenses. If he doesn't have it --
- 11 JUSTICE ALITO: Do you think that the -- do
- 12 you --
- MR. BURKE: -- he's not getting it.
- 14 JUSTICE ALITO: Do you think that the
- 15 Bankruptcy Code provision freezes the -- the national
- 16 and local standards to some degree or completely as they
- 17 existed at the time when the statute was enacted?
- 18 MR. BURKE: At the time the debtor files,
- 19 those numbers are frozen.
- 20 JUSTICE ALITO: But the IRS can change --
- 21 otherwise, they can -- going forward, they can
- 22 completely change the national and local standards?
- MR. BURKE: The numbers, but not the
- 24 structure. They can do anything they want when they're
- 25 collecting taxes, but the numbers -- and I think the

1	numbers change on an annual basis.
2	CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you, counsel
3	The case is submitted.
4	(Whereupon, at 11:04 a.m., the case in the
5	above-entitled matter was submitted.)
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